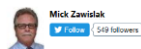


News updated: 2/15/2016 9:03 AM

# Suburbs embrace food scrap recycling to cut 15 percent of landfill waste



Food scrap collection is being pushed by the Solid Waste Agency of Lake County as a way to boost recycling. Midwest Organics Recycling in Wauconda Township is where many of the scraps are taken.  
Courtesy of Lake County/Jeff T. Carlstone

Cleaning your plate will take on a new meaning in some suburbs as food scrap collection grows in practice and popularity. The effort involves collecting food leftovers at the curb and converting them to compost as a way to reduce waste going into landfills.

So far, food scrap collection programs have been voluntary. But starting in May 2017, it will be mandatory in Highwood, a first in Illinois. Several towns in Lake County and other suburbs have or will have some option to recycle food scraps this year.

"We're going to be trend setters, I like to think," said Adrian Marquez, assistant to the Highwood city manager. "We know this is going to be big test."

Food scrap collection and composting is limited in the suburbs, but it is expected to grow as municipal waste hauling contracts come up for renewal and more facilities become available to process the material.

Organic material, including food scraps, is the single largest component of municipal solid waste entering landfills and incinerators across the U.S., according to the [Illinois Food Scrap Coalition](#), which has about 170 members including solid waste agencies, counties, community and government organizations, businesses, schools, institutions, haulers and processors.

U.S. residents throw away up to 40 percent of their food, which amounted to more than 35 million tons in 2013, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reported.

"It's the next piece of the (waste) stream we can pull out and benefit from," said Mary Allen, recycling and education director for the [Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County](#). Allen co-founded and is on the board of the Illinois Food Scrap Coalition, organized in 2012 to advance composting across Illinois through programs, policies and advocacy.

## Food scrap benefits



**Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor walks with Midwest Organics site manager Andy Klink.** - Courtesy of Lake County/Jeff T. Carlstone

Reducing food waste saves the water, gasoline, energy, labor, pesticides, land and fertilizers used to make food, and cuts methane -- a greenhouse gas -- produced by rotting food in landfills, the EPA says.

Municipal collection programs, and those underway or expanding at schools, businesses and other institutions, are gaining momentum as optional services offered by haulers to collect food scraps.

At home, people collect food scraps in airtight containers they keep on the counter or in the refrigerator. In most programs, they then mix the scraps with yard waste in a bag or container that they put out on the curb to be collected along with garbage and other recyclables. Most food except meat, grease and tea bags can be included.

The scraps and yard waste are taken to a recycling facility, where the materials are placed in long rows and regularly turned to promote decomposition.

While some skeptics raise concerns about bugs, wildlife and odors from composting facilities, experts say those aren't issues with proper siting and care.

According to Midwest Organics Recycling in Wauconda Township, compost piles emit odor only when the process is improperly managed, and a bad odor usually indicates the compost pile is not getting enough oxygen. Turning the compost piles regularly will maintain a high oxygen level and eliminate odor issues, according to the company. Compost resembles soil and is odor-free.

As of 2010, food scraps were included in state law as organic material that could be composted. A lack of facilities to accept a large volume of food scraps, transportation costs and the density of collection routes have contributed to the slow start of recycling programs in Illinois, Allen said.

"It's kind of catching fire, but the economics still aren't there. It also depends where you live," she said.

Education is an important element, noted Kay McKeen, founder of the Glen Ellyn-based [School & Community Assistance for Recycling and Composting Education](#). In 2014, the group pioneered a one-day pumpkin composting event that inspired the College of Lake County to do the same last fall.

"We're 10 years behind California, at least. Now is our chance," she added.

With an overall recycling rate of 48 percent but a goal of diverting 60 percent of waste from landfills by 2020, Lake County has emerged as a regional leader in residential food scrap collection. That diversion rate is priming Lake County's effort, but DuPage, Will, Cook, and Kane counties also are promoting food composting as municipal hauling contracts go to bid or are renegotiated, Allen said.

"We are all on board, just more Lake County contracts are being renewed first," she said.

To help reach its recycling goal, the Solid Waste Agency of Lake County is focusing on the food scraps that account for nearly 15 percent of material dumped in landfills across the country. Agency officials say food scrap recycling will be a priority in 2016.

"Changing behavior is never easy, and in many cases it costs more to have another level of service for food scraps," said Walter Willis, the agency's executive director. "Interest is definitely increasing, though."

One example is Grayslake, where residents can mix food scraps with yard waste starting April 1. The village also plans to establish the county's first year-round drop-off site, which would be at no cost but require registration. Winter collection and year-round curbside service each would require the registration by Sept. 1 of a minimum of 175 residents.

These would be the first villagewide food scrap collection programs in Grayslake, although residents in the Prairie Crossing conservation community in the village have self-funded a program for at least 15 years. At the peak of a season, as many as 90 households have their scraps collected once a week for use on a farm there.



## Recycling efforts



**Students at Stratford Middle School in Carol Stream Elementary District 93 participate in lunchroom composting.** - Courtesy of Carol Stream Elementary District 93

In Lake County, Deer Park, Highland Park, Island Lake, Port Barrington, North Barrington and Tower Lakes allow residents to commingle food scraps with landscape or yard waste eight months of the year. North Barrington also has a subscription program in which residents pay extra to have scraps collected at the curb during the four months yard waste is not collected.

Highwood's recycling rate is at 18 percent, Marquez said, and the new mandatory food scrap recycling is expected to boost that number.

"That's one of the reasons we decided to make such a drastic change," he said.

Midwest Organics Recycling processes a good portion of residential food scraps and most, if not all, of the food scraps from Lake County grocery stores that collect them, Willis said.

Elsewhere in the suburbs, Barrington residents can place approved food scraps inside their 95-gallon compost cart on the same days as regular recycling and refuse pickup, beginning March 18. Select Barrington Unit District 220 schools also will participate, according to Allen.

In DuPage County, Naperville started a program last summer and Wheaton has asked its residents for input about food scrap composting, McKeen said.

A test collection program for students in Carol Stream Elementary District 93 expanded last month and is set to debut in three more schools. Kids will teach their parents about food scrap recycling.

"These parents are going to be ready when their (waste hauling) contract is up and it comes to their town," McKeen said.

The practice has become old hat in Oak Park, where in April 2012 a test program allowed residents in 110 households to mix food scraps with yard waste.

It expanded villagewide in 2013 and 950 households, nine schools, six churches, two park district facilities, the Oak Park food pantry, farmers market and various special events now participate. Neighboring River Forest began a program last summer.